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# UN Climate Summit: A New Approach for Agriculture and Forests?

Posted on [October 6, 2014](#) by [Annalisa Savaresi](#)



By Annalisa Savaresi

October 2014: As global carbon dioxide emissions [reportedly](#) reached new highs, representatives from hundreds of national and subnational governments, companies, and civil society organizations gathered in New York for the [Climate Summit](#) convened by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on 23 September 2014. The summit was intended to raise political momentum towards the adoption of a new climate agreement in 2015 and seemingly managed to infuse climate diplomacy with fresh energy.

Several States [announced](#) national actions to address climate change, as well as increased contributions to climate finance, most notably [China](#) and the [European Union](#). The summit furthermore saw a host of [multilateral and multi-stakeholder announcements](#) on actions to address climate change clustered around eight themes: agriculture; cities; energy; financing; forests; industry; resilience; and transportation. For the purposes of BENELEX, the most interesting developments were the adoption of the New York Declaration on Forests and the launch of the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture.

## The New York Declaration on Forests

One of the highlights of the Climate Summit was the adoption of the [New York Declaration on Forests](#), whereby a coalition of developed and developing countries (with the significant exception of Brazil), subnational governments, companies, indigenous peoples' and civil society organizations pledged to halve global loss of

natural forests by 2020 and reduce it to zero by 2030; eliminate deforestation from the production of agricultural commodities and significantly reduce deforestation derived from other economic sectors by 2020; and restore 150 million hectares of degraded landscapes and forestlands by 2020. Although a mere political declaration, this is the first concrete move towards adopting a multilaterally agreed global target for climate change mitigation in the forest sector, which may eventually be embedded in the 2015 agreement.

After almost ten years of negotiations on measures to incentivize the conservation and enhancement of carbon in forests in developing countries, (commonly referred to with the acronym REDD+), Parties to the UNFCCC have yet to agree on a global target to do so. Such a target was perceived as a fundamental prerequisite for coordinated international action on REDD+ (see [Eliasch Review](#)) but only made a brief appearance in the negotiation text in preparation for Copenhagen Climate Conference in 2009, never to appear again. The New York Declaration on Forests therefore represents a first step towards the adoption of such a target, potentially providing an important piece to complete the REDD+ puzzle (see [BENELEX](#) post).

The New York Declaration on Forests is also notable in that it pledges to “support alternatives to deforestation driven by *basic needs* (such as subsistence farming and reliance on fuel wood for energy) in ways that *alleviate poverty* and promote *sustainable and equitable development*.” The Declaration furthermore refers to “strengthen[ing] forest governance, transparency and the rule of law, while also *empowering communities and recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, especially those pertaining to their lands and resources*.” These statements re-emphasise that consideration for social impacts and equity are crucial for climate change mitigation endeavors in the forest sector.

These considerations have been at the heart of negotiations on REDD+ from the beginning. The [International Panel on Climate Change](#) specifically warned that forest-based mitigation activities would need to avoid negative impacts associated with competition between land uses. Moreover, the [Eliasch Review](#) unequivocally asserted that the long-term success of REDD+ would depend upon ensuring that it benefits “poor people and forest communities.” Parties to the UNFCCC have attempted to address these concerns by adopting [safeguards](#) explicitly requesting that REDD+ activities avoid causing harm and “enhance other social and environmental benefits.” The matter is furthermore being addressed in the context of ongoing negotiations on the so-called non-carbon benefits of REDD+, where specific benefit-sharing considerations have emerged (see [BENELEX](#) blogpost).

The New York Declaration has reasserted the centrality of *intra-State equity* considerations to negotiations on REDD+, arguably going beyond the requirements already included in extant safeguards, by specifically making reference to the empowerment of communities and the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to lands and resources (see [BENELEX](#) blogpost).

## Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture

Another initiative with potentially wide-reaching consequences was the launch of the [Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture](#), as a “voluntary, farmer-led, multi-stakeholder” coalition of States, civil society and international and scientific organisations for the incorporation of climate change considerations in food and agriculture systems. Agriculture has long been a contentious matter at climate negotiations, and the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice has only recently agreed to undertake some rather limited scientific and technical [work](#) on the issue.

The Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture aims to improve food and nutrition security by helping to adjust agricultural practices, food systems and social policies so as to take into account climate change and efficient use of natural resources. The Alliance’s aspirational outcomes are “*sustainable and equitable increases in agricultural productivity and incomes*; greater resilience of food systems and farming *livelihoods*; and reduction and/or removal of greenhouse gas emissions associated with agriculture.” Its programmatic document also states that the Alliance could “create an environment for common outcomes that builds on *indigenous knowledge systems*, and also bears in mind smallholders and the poorest and most marginalized communities.” The Alliance is furthermore set to encourage efforts that promote “*participatory approaches* and consultation mechanisms, providing a voice for farmers, including women farmers, and recognizing the crucial role of farmers’ organizations, to yield maximum *community – and country – level benefits*.”

While the complexities underlying the debate on farmers’ rights (see [BENELEX blogpost](#)) are not on the agenda, emphasis on intra-State equity considerations has become increasingly frequent at climate negotiations. Awareness of the perverse outcomes associated with the implementation of some [Clean Development Mechanism \(CDM\) projects](#) and with the production of [biofuels](#) has drawn States’ attention to the need to be particularly vigilant of the social impacts of land-based climate change mitigation activities. The [international institutions](#) behind the establishment of the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture have already developed a portfolio of activities and guidance to better integrate climate change mitigation with poverty alleviation and equity concerns.

While it remains to be seen how this new alliance will manage to juggle these ambitious and potentially conflicting objectives, this bottom-up endeavor is yet another manifestation of the fact that, in this like other fields of climate governance, coalitions of willing State and non-State actors are increasingly establishing transnational initiatives, bypassing the stalemate affecting international climate negotiations. Their emancipation from the dire straits of climate negotiations has seemingly rendered these initiatives more willing to engage with the complex interface between climate change mitigation, poverty alleviation and intra-State equity.

## Outlook

Time will tell whether the political will expressed at the UN summit will translate into greater momentum at climate negotiations, providing a much needed gear shift toward the adoption of a new climate agreement in 2015. The first reality check will be the next session of the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) [in October 2014](#), where UNFCCC Parties will gather to discuss the [elements of the draft negotiating text](#) of a new climate agreement. Mitigation from the forest and agriculture sectors is just a sideshow in the grand bargain on a new climate agreement. It is nevertheless a rather sensitive matter, as the mitigation potential in these sectors largely lies in developing countries, where intra-State equity and benefit-sharing concerns are particularly pressing. Parties to the UNFCCC have so far been reluctant to address these delicate matters in a spirit of mutual-supportiveness, drawing inspiration from guidance adopted in the context of other international instruments and processes. The initiatives on agriculture and forests launched at the UN Climate Summit may, however, mark the beginning of a new approach, by giving greater prominence to intra-State equity considerations in forest and land-based climate change mitigation activities.

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